

HE WENT AWAY SAD BECAUSE HE HAD GREAT WEALTH

Mark 10:17-31 The Rich Young Man

¹⁷ And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸ And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰ And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.” ²¹ And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” ²² Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

²³ And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” ²⁴ And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” ²⁶ And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.” ²⁸ Peter began to say to him, “See, we have left everything and followed you.” ²⁹ Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, ³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

MESSAGE:

“How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:23) The story of the rich young man and the famous saying it contains have given wealthy Christians ulcers ever since Jesus told it. It was deeply troubling to his disciples, even though they were not themselves rich. It not only confused them, it threw a monkey wrench into their basic understanding of how the relationship between God and man was supposed to work. It challenged their very idea of what the word “blessing” was supposed to mean. This was, as they liked to say, a “hard saying,” which forced them to re-think their notion of what Jesus’ message was really all about. What was He trying to tell them—and us?

Now the rich young man was unusual in that he was both materially and spiritually rich. By the standards of first-century Judaism, he would have represented the very pinnacle of achievement. To have acquired riches while remaining morally pure—and at a young age at that!—this would have been all that any man could hope for. For that matter, would we disagree? Moral purity, youth and wealth—how can it get any better than that? I guess you could also have a good steak and a Michélob on the table in front of you, but that’s about all that could add to your pleasure.

The Israelites had always believed that God favored those who pleased Him with tangible blessings, and the Jews of Jesus’ day were no exception. For that matter, the Torah seemed to support such a notion: after all, hadn’t God promised the children of Moses that He would lead them to a “land of milk and honey? Hadn’t he promised Solomon that He would give him “riches as a reward for his spiritual humility? Hadn’t He promised the Israelites that he would “plant each man in his own vineyard?”

These words had always been understood to mean exactly what they seemed to say: if the Israelites obeyed the Law and kept their worship pure, Yahweh would reward them by making them prosperous. If you honored God, God would bless you with plenty of kids, cattle and crops. Now it’s a big house, a big IRA and a Cadillac in the garage, but the idea remains the same: the Lord rewards those who please Him with nice things. And then Jesus comes along and says that it’s next to impossible for a man with a lot of nice things to even ENTER the kingdom of heaven. And, along with his Jewish disciples, we say: “Huh?”

When you come to a difficult passage in Scripture, the best way to approach it is to consider it in light of simpler passages which deal with the same subject. Scripture interprets itself, and since it all bears the fingerprints of God it has perfect integrity. That means that it all fits together and no part of it will contradict any other part. Therefore, the most reliable way to unravel the difficult passages is to examine them through the lens of the clearer ones. Let’s try that.

First of all, what do the Scriptures have to say about material possessions? Are the nice things that we own—and would like to own—bad? No, Scripture never says that there is anything wrong with “things” in and of themselves. Evil does not originate in anything outside a person, it originates in the person himself—in the human heart. Jesus says this as clearly as it can be said when he told the crowds: *“Nothing outside a man can make him unclean by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean... For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man unclean.”* (Mark 7:18-23) So our possessions aren’t bad in themselves and they don’t make us bad: we’re already bad to begin with.

So it was not wrong for the rich young man to have wealth. Marxists and liberation theologians have been trying for decades to make the Bible say that it’s a sin to be rich, and that rich people are the cause of many evils. But the Bible never says that. David was rich and he was a man after the Lord’s own heart. Solomon was

rich because God made him rich. Joseph of Arimathea was rich and proved himself a loyal friend of our Lord when all of his other disciples deserted Him. For that matter, if a rich man is disposed to be charitable, his riches can be a source of blessing to others. Riches are not the problem: the human heart is the problem.

And the problem with the human heart is that it never seems to be satisfied merely by *having* things—it wants to make idols out of things. It makes sex an idol and worships it with lust. It makes food an idol and worships it with gluttony. It makes other people's possessions an idol, and worships them with envy. It makes money an idol—the idol God calls Mammon—and worships it with greed. As the *Proverb* goes, *"The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters."* (*Proverbs 20:5*) Often, they are unknown even to the man himself. But what we DO know is that ever since the tragedy of Eden, when we traded eternal life for the knowledge of evil, man has sought idols to worship. We laugh at primitive people for worshipping totem poles and nature gods, then turn around and place all our hopes for happiness and security in our pensions and IRA's. We haven't really changed all that much, have we? Led around by our idols like pigs with rings in our noses, we worship them right up to the day they turn to dust and ashes in our hands, and leave us with nothing. *"Fool! This very night your soul will be required of you! And then what will come of all your gold?"* (*Luke 12:20*) The rich young man was not sad because he had great wealth, he went away sad because Jesus forced him to see that he loved his wealth more than he loved Jesus and his fellow man. Wealth had become his idol, the object of his worship. Jesus loved him, but his idol was jealous and prevented him from loving Jesus and his fellow man more than his idol. And so he went away sad.

The comedian Richard Pryor used to do a routine about a popular television preacher responding on the air to viewers who had written him letters criticizing his lavish lifestyle. His response went something like this: *"You say I should give up my penthouse, my swimming pool, my Cadillac and my girlfriends! Well that's easy for you to say, because you HAVE none of those things!"* How true, how true. You see, with the HAVING comes the LOVING—that's the problem. It's hard to accumulate wealth without coming to love it, because, as Jesus said, *"Where your treasure is, there will be your heart."* (*Matthew 6:21*) There's nothing wrong with money, but there's a lot wrong with worshipping money. It's not money that is the root of all evil, it's the love of money that is the root of all evil. You cannot serve both God and Mammon.

It's really just a matter of putting things in the right order. God wants us to have and to enjoy the things of this world. That's why he made them in the first place! He just doesn't want us to worship them. And He knows that that can rather easily happen. So He helps us, sometimes by taking away from us the things we love most—not to cause us grief, but to make it possible for us to love Him more. When we learn to do that—to see the loss of the things we love as an opportunity to love God more—then we've learned a great truth. In His *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus says: *"...do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear....For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His*

righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” God wants to give us gifts. He wants us to enjoy them, too. He just wants us to love and enjoy the Giver more than the gifts.

Did you notice what Jesus says at the end of the passage? *“I tell you the truth, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and along with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.”* The last blessing Jesus names is persecutions! If by any chance you were getting comfortable with Jesus, if He were starting to make sense to you—well, here we go again! Another “hard saying,” to be sure. How can persecutions be a blessing? For that matter, how can we lose our home and families and possessions and then have them replaced a hundred-fold? Are we like Job?

Well, yes—in a way. Anyone who has been part of an unbelieving family and has come to know Christ probably has a good idea of the tensions and hostilities and even bitterness it can cause between himself and his family. Many people sitting here today have had that experience. And so Jesus is not exaggerating when he speaks of leaving brother and sister and mother and father to follow Him. Sometimes it comes to exactly that. But in their place he will inherit a much larger family, an eternal family: the family of believers which we call the Body of Christ, the Church. And that is a fellowship of brothers and sisters in Christ which gives us a foretaste of the heavenly communion we will have one day with Christ in heaven. We had that foretaste a week ago Saturday at Leah Vandercook’s funeral service, The members of this church came together as the body of Christ to literally pour out their love and consolation to the members of Leah’s family. But this inheritance—being part of the Body of Christ on earth—will often involve persecution because true church will always be the persecuted church. And by the persecution it draws, its members will know that their newfound family is indeed the Body of Christ. And what could be a better blessing than that? What could bring more blessed assurance than that? God is our Father, a Father who has loved us with an everlasting love, and we are His children. Praise the Lord!

Amen